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Slingerland Songster

Cool enough for Sol Hoppi!

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By **ERIC C. SHOAF**



If you ask anyone what the company Slingerland has done for the history of music the answer most often given is, "Drums." Indeed, the company has been quite successful through the years as a manufacturer of drum and percussion instruments. But in the 1920s and '30s, Slingerland produced a variety of instruments, including banjos and guitars, including decent-quality archtops. But it focused mostly at the budget and beginner level, and never developed any following or reputation for its fretted instruments.

The Slingerland Songster model pictured here catered to the Hawaiian music crowd- which at the time was at the height of its popularity - but never really caught on because it was introduced just before the beginning of World War II, and because Slingerland didn't have nearly the distribution system of the larger companies such as Gibson, Rickenbacker, Gretsch, or Epiphone. But this example, which dates from about 1939, boasts several interesting innovations that hadn't caught on with any of the other makers.

The Songster features a "neck-through" design with solid wings and a maple veneer glued over the top, back, and sides, to give a one-piece look. The pickup configuration is unusual in that each polepiece is individually wound in opposite directions to create a humbucking effect, and although it appears small, the bulk of the magnet and windings is concealed from view. The sound has a distinctly "woody" tone that's less pure than the Bakelite-bodied Rickenbackers of the period. But it's still appealing. The metal pickup overlay sports the Slingerland logo in script.

The square neck features a 24" scale and simple pearl dot position ornamentation. Fret markers are true inlaid metal frets that have been ground down flush with the rosewood fingerboard. Certainly it would have been cheaper to leave the frets at full height (as on the square neck National metal-bodied guitars) or use painted or plastic inlaid fret markers (like Gibson EH models). The ivoroid nut is tall, and its height has been further raised on this example with a separate Slingerland-made metal overlay. The tailpiece is also a Slingerland product produced in-house, and the bridge is a compensated floating unit. Knobs are made of octagon-shaped Bakelite with smaller pointer arrows.

The headstock features a crushed pearl inlay reminiscent of the covering on the company's drums, with "Slingerland" on top, "Songster" on the bottom, and a diamond in the middle. The headstock's shape is very Gibson-like, certainly enough to spawn a copyright lawsuit had this guitar been released in 1995! Tuners are high-quality open-back Grovers with plastic buttons and there is a serial number impressed on the back of the headstock.

The cord from the pickup exits the lower bass-side bout through a nice metal-finished hole (no separate jack here) and sports cloth-covered wiring and a rather large bakelite covered plug. This Songster is complete with its original black alligator grained case with green plush lining, the same found with some of the top-line archtops from Gibson and Epiphone models of the period. It's a clean, well-kept example and perhaps its most striking feature is the highly flamed maple veneer that covers the top, back, and sides. A "10 top" in today's parlance and an example of how attractive such a guitar could be made to look. Even the pickup/controls cover is highly figured, and bound, as is the top, back, and neck of the guitar. The finish is a light golden sunburst; this is a model even Sol Hoopii would have liked, if only for its looks!

But Slingerland never aggressively marketed the Songster line, and production ceased at the start of World War II. Few were produced, which is all the more unfortunate since in 1939 Slingerland marketed a less well-known version of the solidbody Songster, an electric Spanish model that featured a round neck, 25" scale, full frets, and even a pickguard!

Today, both the squareneck and roundneck versions of the Songster are rare, but neither is terribly soughtafter, perhaps because the Slingerland name doesn't carry the caché of a Gibson or Rickenbacker. But the Songster did boast several firsts in solid wood design and was a well-made, high-quality instrument. It certainly deserves to be better remembered.

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